

VZCZCXRO2726  
RR RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM  
DE RUEHHI #0256/01 0400745  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 090745Z FEB 07  
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4567  
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH 2497  
RUEHHS/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE  
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI 1443  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0189  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0498  
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 0054  
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 0493  
RUEHSW/AMEMBASSY BERN 0053  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0212  
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0013

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 000256

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF, DRL/AWH

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [HUMANR](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: HANOI CHIEFS OF MISSION DISCUSS HUMAN RIGHTS,  
VIETNAM-VATICAN TIES

Ref: Vatican 25

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Summary  
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1. (SBU) On January 31, EC Ambassador Markus Cornaro hosted the third in a series of Hanoi Ambassadors' human rights discussions. Among the issues discussed were:

-- The overall human rights situation in Vietnam: Most COMs noted progress, but expressed some concerns regarding Protestants in the north, occasional reports of harassment of Central Highlands returnees and harassment of dissidents and labor activists;

-- Human rights dialogues with Vietnam: Switzerland plans to hold its next round in May. Norway recently held its dialogue in Norway, and the European Union held its own dialogue in December 2006;

-- Prisoners of Concern/Dissidents: Most countries reported having lists of prisoners of concern and plan to continue to press the GVN to release individuals of concern. The COMs agreed that it is important to follow and stay in touch with, as appropriate, activists and the new groups that have appeared on the scene;

-- Human rights-related technical cooperation: Several projects are underway, including workshops on torture prevention and a program to train judges. Upcoming projects include several in the area of women's rights; and,

-- Vietnam-Vatican relations: Normalization of relations between the Vatican and Vietnam remains a high-profile issue, particularly after Prime Minister Dung's meeting with the Pope. One COM expressed concern that "China would never allow Vietnam to take this step before China does." End Summary.

Overall Human Rights Situation  
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2. (SBU) On January 31, EC Ambassador Markus Cornaro hosted the third in a series of Hanoi Ambassadors' human rights discussions (Ambassador Marine hosted the previous session and the French

Ambassador hosted the inaugural meeting). Ambassador Cornaro opened by describing the EU Troika Ambassadors' mission to the Central Highlands (Kon Tum and Gia Lai provinces) in October 2006. The mission registered progress in socio-economic development and in the implementation of the Vietnam's legal framework on religion. The Troika also conducted interviews with ethnic minority returnees from Cambodia. Overall, the returnees seemed relatively well integrated, but a few who had been forcibly repatriated reported some harassment by border police officials.

¶3. (SBU) The German Ambassador briefly summarized the EU's human rights report on Vietnam. In recent years, developments have been generally positive, but the record remains mixed. There has been greater religious freedom, but concerns remain regarding Protestants in the north. On the other hand, the EU report cites a slowdown in progress in freedom of expression and internet freedom. For the EU, the death penalty is still a concern. On the whole, there appears to be greater GVN sensitivity to international pressure, reflected recently in the GVN's cautious response to the emergence of new dissident groups. Ambassador Marine noted that President Triet will visit the United States later this year, and the USG will try to leverage this for progress in human rights and other areas.

#### Human Rights Dialogues with Vietnam/Benchmarking -----

¶4. (SBU) The EU's most recent human rights dialogue (HRD) was held on December 20, 2006, the German Ambassador continued. There were improved atmospherics under the chairmanship of MFA Department of International Organizations Director General Le Hoai Trung. The GVN responded positively to the EU's proposals for reinvigorating the HRD, including by upgrading its representation and focusing on concrete deliverables. The GVN expressed a renewed commitment to accede to the UN Convention Against Torture. The EU delegation also had a good exchange with Committee on Religious Affairs representatives on the issue of religious freedom. However, the

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dialogue had its rough patches: the GVN representatives reacted sharply to accusations of official censorship, with a Ministry of Culture and Information official describing his ministry as a "shock absorber" for "negative" repercussions of Vietnam's international integration. The GVN representatives also described EU contacts with dissidents as in "breach" of the Geneva Convention, which the EU representatives refuted, the German Ambassador said.

¶5. (SBU) The Swiss Government is planning its next HRD in May 2007 in Vietnam and is awaiting GVN confirmation, the Swiss Ambassador said. The Swiss hope to use this next round as a pilot for longer-term "benchmarking" and are preparing a non-paper to be shared with the GVN. Ambassador Marine described the USG's hope to schedule soon our next HRD round, the topics of which will likely include prisoners of concern, internet restrictions, press freedom, the Law of Associations and Decree 31.

¶6. (SBU) Norway recently held its HRD in Norway, the Norwegian Charge said. The GVN sent an 18-person delegation, led by MFA IO DG Trung. The HRD's formal agenda included the death penalty, human rights defenders and the Convention Against Torture. The New Zealand Ambassador noted that, while his country does not have a formal HRD, it is pursuing an interfaith dialogue, which is co-sponsored by New Zealand and involves Australia and various countries in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. The next session will take place in a few months in New Zealand.

¶7. (SBU) The UK, EC, and German Ambassadors said that benchmarking (as envisaged by Switzerland) is a disputed issue within the EU, noting that a "roadmap" may represent a better approach. That said, and irrespective of terminology, human rights dialogues are an incremental process, requiring a longer-term horizon for the measurement of progress. The EU's aim is to focus more on explicit deliverables and, ideally, both sides should have previously agreed-to objectives for the dialogue. However, Vietnam considers benchmarking "patronizing," calling it a "report card" for Vietnam. An intermediate step for the EU will be to aim at unilateral, but communicated, targets, and will test this at next HRD session in

June 2007.

## Prisoners/Detainees of Concern

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¶18. (SBU) The German and EC Ambassadors noted that there are 22 prisoners on the EU list, with two previous prisoners of concern released in 2006, but two new ones subsequently added. The EU has reiterated its request for the release of all prisoners of concern (particularly Nguyen Vu Binh) during the Tet Amnesty. Ambassador Marine noted that the USG's primary list now has only two names: Binh and Phan Van Ban. The USG is also tracking some 20 other cases, as well as a number of ethnic minority cases that are problematic because of a lack of information and some individuals' possible involvement in violence or human smuggling.

¶19. (SBU) The Australian Charge reported that the GOA's list is shorter, and they recently added PalTalk arrestee Truong Quoc Huy. Canadian Ambassador Lessard said that his Foreign Minister handed over Canada's prisoner list to DPM/FM Pham Gia Khiem on the margins of APEC. PM Harper also raised this issue with PM Nguyen Tan Dung, and the Vietnamese were "taken aback and disappointed" by the Canadian PM's decision to elevate the issue to that level. The Swiss and Norwegian representatives reported that their own lists had 17 and five individuals, respectively. All of the COMs agreed that it would be useful to share and coordinate their respective prisoner lists.

## New Dissident Groups

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¶10. (SBU) Ambassador Marine noted that, within the past two months, the HCMC External Relations Office has told us that the U.S. Mission requires permission to meet with dissidents. We are resisting this, and, in general, we can meet whom we want. The situation is less tense now than during APEC, and Mission Vietnam stays in touch with dissidents, but tries "not to overload the circuits." Still, the GVN accuses us of "aiding and abetting" dissidents, some of whom may seek to run in the May National Assembly election. The USG also

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disagrees with the HCMC authorities over the size of ConGen HCMC's consular district.

¶11. (SBU) Since 2006, the EU has maintained a list of activists and others in Vietnam as part of a global EU campaign to support human rights defenders, Ambassador Cornaro said. The EU will seek to maintain contact with these individuals, and the approaches to these individuals are necessarily "a la carte." The French Ambassador suggested that our missions should strike a balance: follow developments and report to capitals, but do not allow groups to claim we support them. When the GVN makes an issue of this, we should insist that contact with dissidents and others is part of our job here.

## HR-Related Technical Cooperation

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¶12. (SBU) The COMs discussed a number of their countries' respective projects, which include efforts to improve women's rights, train judges and prevent torture.

## Vietnam-Vatican Relations

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¶13. (SBU) Ambassador Marine raised PM Dung's January visit to the Vatican (reftel), noting that Dung succeeded only by overcoming concerns from "conservative" players in the Central Committee. The French Ambassador said that meeting the Pope was Dung's primary aim in Europe, but what he accomplished remains unclear. Vatican "Prime Minister" Bertoni suggested normalizing relations, and the Vietnamese responded that both sides' diplomats should discuss this. The obstacles for the Catholic Church in Vietnam include a lack of access to land and the inability to participate in charitable activities. As a result, hard discussions lie ahead, the French Ambassador said.

¶14. (SBU) The EC Ambassador suggested that Vietnam sees normalization of Vatican ties as part of its ongoing international integration. However, one senior Communist Party official had pointedly noted to him that "China would never allow Vietnam to take this step before China does." Ambassador Marine responded that both Vietnam and the Vatican seem to think they can move ahead without necessarily waiting for China.

¶15. (SBU) Participants:

European Commission (host): Amb. Markus Cornaro  
United States: Ambassador Michael Marine  
Germany: Ambassador C.-L. Weber-Lortsch  
France: Ambassador Jean-Francois Blarel  
Australia: CDA Andrea Faulkner  
Norway: CDA Leiv Landro  
Canada: Ambassador Gabriel Lessard  
Switzerland: Ambassador Benedict de Cerjat  
United Kingdom: Ambassador Robert Gordon  
New Zealand: Ambassador James Kember

MARINE